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## Original Article

# Vivência: From disciplined to remade lived experience in the Brazilian avant-garde of the 1960s

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**Abstract** In this article, I will address the artistic practices of the Brazilian avant-garde of the 1960s that revolved around the notion of *vivência* or 'lived thought'. These artistic practices – illustrated by two emblematic examples by, respectively, Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark – should not only be regarded as a counter-practice to hegemonic historical developments, but they should also be looked at in terms of the culture-specific frame of experience in which they figure. As such, this article develops an anthropological investigation into the concrete dynamics of these artistic practices and the manner in which they were socio-culturally informed. To frame the connection between artistic practices and other culture-specific ones, a particular aspect of the concept of embodiment will be deployed.

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**Keywords:** embodiment; lived experience; artistic practices; Brazil; anthropology

## Introduction

The artists of the Brazilian post-neoconcrete avant-garde, as it crystallized in the mid-1960s, started to focus closely on the psycho-corporal experience of the 'spectator', which they called the 'participant'. More precisely, what these post-neoconcrete artists called the participants' *vivência* became the central nexus of their artistic practice. In this article, I will investigate this notion of *vivência*, and more concretely, the manner in which these artists tried to affect it. To elucidate this question, I will not only examine how *vivência* was described by the artists themselves, but also – arguing that an artist can only partially give a conscious account of her or his artistic 'content' – how this attempt to affect the participant's *vivência* through psycho-corporal experience manifests itself in a Brazilian culture-specific



frame. The latter entails researching how the creative practices of these artists were socio-culturally informed and how they tapped into existing cultural practices, *and* in their turn creatively acted upon those socio-cultural strata. As such I will focus on what I believe is a fundamental germinal ground of their practices, usually not addressed or at least left aside in art historical accounts. I will frame this investigation through a particular aspect of the concept of embodiment, that is, how it enables us to think the seminal or germinal capacities of the body in terms of the production of meaning, or what we could term the generative potential of embodiment.

### **Vivência Revisited: The Foundations of 'Lived Thought'**

At the beginning of the 1960s a number of Brazilian artists, mainly *carrioca* (that is, from Rio de Janeiro), abandoned the supremacy of the visually constituted artistic field. Up until then they had been steeped in Western avant-garde tendencies, namely constructivism and concretism, influences which were appropriated, respectively, with affirmation (because of the potential relation of constructivism to the expressive capacity of form) and with contention (because of concretism's outlook on form as merely mechanical) in what the artists termed 'neococoncretism'. The new school, which manifestly affirmed itself as a 'break' with former traditions, came to be known as 'post-neococoncretism', with Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica as its emblematic standard bearers. Its fundamental attitude was to appeal to the body not as a mere 'eye-machine' (Gullar, 1989, p. 335), but in its synaesthetic totality. This artistic sensibility would take a panoply of forms in the historical course of Brazilian art, and still makes itself felt today. The most telling feature of this radicalized artistic practice was the increasing dematerialization and 'demythification' of the art object, alongside the body of what they now came to call 'the participant' occupying centre stage. What the artists put forward instead was the art object as a minimal 'proposition'. The temporal intersubjective space between artwork and spectator – termed 'spatialization' by the art theoretician Ferreira Gullar, neococoncretism's rhetorical father – was now to be collapsed by the indistinguishable merging of object and body. Thus arose what Oiticica termed an 'intercorporeal relation', whereby the 'inner' was not to be understood as a literal 'in-between', but as a *reciprocal incorporation*. In sum, the 'artwork' was bereft of its so-called autonomy and its concurring ideological entanglements (for example, the construction of the artist figure), and was now regarded as a mere *latent* proposition, to be completed by the *vivência* of the participant in order to come into being at all. Put differently: the artists envisioned the emanation of *vivência* through the specific manner in which the proposition sensorially and meaningfully inscribed itself into the immediacy of psychocorporeal experience. This central role attributed to *vivência* was something the

artists issued either literally or indirectly. In any case, they understood *vivência* – either consciously or through their artistic practices – as a way of 'thinking' and 'knowing' which manifests itself in the *immanent immediacy* of the psychocorporeal experience of the participant, and its intertwined *creative* potential.

Translating *vivência*, in Western terms, as 'life experience' would fail to voice its true conception: it is not an experience, which one accumulates during a certain span of time, and by which one distinguishes oneself. On the contrary, it is diametrically opposed to such an understanding, and was conceived of as a 'democratically aligned experience' (Breitwieser, 2000, p. 17), situated in the immediacy of a 'becoming' and most accurately translated with the neologism *lived thought*, that is referring to synaesthetic sensory experience that contemporaneously activates an immediate creative epistemological faculty. The artists often used the Möbius strip – a geometrical figure which is at the same time inside and outside, and presents both as an uninterrupted continuity – as a kind of ideogram that expressed the dynamics of *vivência*. Lygia Pape, another artist who joined Clark and Oiticica in the radicalization of their art, posited it literally as an ideogram for her own artistic practice, which envisioned abolishing the distinction between art and life, equally pointing to the sensorial inscription of the 'artwork' in the whole life experience of the participant (Pape and Pedrosa, 1983). Lygia Clark appropriated the figure in *Caminhando* (1963) and *Trepantes* (1964–1987), and it recurs as a motif in the artistic practices of, among others, Tunga and Cildo Meireles, who were part of the next generation of Brazilian artists. The Möbius strip 'visualized' or allowed one to experience not only 'inside' and 'outside' (that is, life experience and artistic proposition) merging into a single continuity, but it also related to a particular conception of 'becoming', as mentioned above: not 'becoming' as the transition from one state to another, but a 'becoming' as an incessantly 'being turned inside out', a 'becoming' as a continuity without caesura. The immediacy of this experience was clearly voiced in Lygia Clark's text 'Concerning the Instant' dating from 1965, where she stated:

Only the instant of the act is life. By its nature, the act contains in itself its own outstripping, *its own becoming*. The instant of the act is the only living reality in us. To become aware is already to be in the past. (Clark, 1994, p. 100, my emphasis)

Although the word *vivência* was only introduced in the Portuguese language in the twentieth century, and could have been said to be a translation from a European psychological and phenomenological discourse – the latter clearly also influenced artists such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark – we see that in the course of the century *vivência* came to denote 'life experience' in Portuguese, but in Brazilian Portuguese continued to refer to the processual 'experience of living'.<sup>1</sup> This lexical sensibility must have articulated itself out of the same



frame of experience of the artistic practices of these artists. In this respect, we see that *vivência*, as a particular Brazilian lexical sensibility and in its conception of 'lived thought', also ties in with another conception of the syncretistic Brazilian culture, that took root in the Brazilian daily life-world simultaneously with the crystallization of the artists' radicalized artistic practices, namely *axé*.<sup>2</sup> *Axé* was originally an Afro-Brazilian religious-aesthetic notion, which originated from the Yoruba culture, the most dominant culture in the formation of Afro-Brazilian culture, and according to Roland Abiodun the sole culture to survive the African diaspora. As such it remained a notion of pivotal importance in the Afro-Brazilian *Candomblé* religion, and later on also in the widespread *Umbanda* religion which became a manifest feature of syncretistic Brazilian culture when it spread to the fast urbanizing cities in the 1930s and crystallized as a feature of common daily reality during the same time span in which the respective artists were at work. *Axé* is understood as a force that is neither good nor bad, but that has the potential to make things happen. *Axé* is absolute power present in all things and those humans can also possess it who through education, initiation and experience learn to manipulate it in order to enhance their own lives and the lives of those around them. *Axé* as a vital energy re-impregnates all immanent beings through ritual activities, mediated through the *orixás* or personal gods. Ritual activity is not the only thing that furthers *axé's* impregnation of the altar and its surroundings, it most outspokenly manifests itself as a creative force during a trance of possession by the personal *orixá* – where heightened sensory experience is one of the components. The *orixá* is supposed to enter the body via an incision in the head, the stem *orí* referring to the physical head but also the inner head or inner person, controlling one's being. The potential of the self is appealed to:

The proclivities and tastes of the *orixá* are those of the person's most fundamental self, which may have been obscured or distorted by conformity to social conventions. The process of initiation allows one to identify with certainty one's spiritual guide as well as to become familiar with one's own deep nature and truest impulses. (Walker, 1990, p. 123)

The incorporation of *axé* is now supposed to enable the possessed to tap into an embodied faculty that potentially unlocks an experiencing of the self obscured by conformity to social conventions, which generates a renewed 'understanding' of oneself, in this instance one also becomes reinscribed in the relation towards one's life-world. *Axé* thus restructures and transforms the life-world, instantiates a renewed resonance between life-world and person. Moreover, this relationality is also the key paradigm of Yoruban epistemology: the way to bring about knowledge is not by knowing a thing in itself – as classical Western ontology would claim – but only as revealed in a relationality. Knowing presupposes an understanding of the relation that exists between things,

or better: of their mutual immersive 'mirroring'. Also Yoruban aesthetics derive from this worldview and point to the working of *axé*; *axé* is expressed here or externalized in visual or performance arts. The Yoruban art object therefore has four dimensions, the temporal dimension being the most significant. Matter as such is a mere vehicle, or the outward and visible expression of energy or life force. As Abiodun posits: 'Thus it is energy and not matter, dynamic and not static being, which is the true nature of things' (Abiodun, 1994, p. 78).

In sum, we could conclude that the conception of *vivência* originally stemmed from a phenomenological discourse, but to really grasp what particular conception the artists consciously or unconsciously envisioned, we also have to tie it in with the particular ideogram of the Möbius strip and the way in which the artists charged it with meaning, and with the notion of *axé* as a conception reverberating with notions of a creative, transformative power, processual becoming ('dynamic being') and relationality.

### *Parangolés, Máscaras Sensoriais and a Dynamics of Unlocking*

The radicalized artistic practices, with the participant's *vivência* as their central nexus, became emblematically embodied in Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés* (from 1964 onwards). The *Parangolés* were 'propositions' often realized together with artist friends or friends from the *favelas*. They often displayed captions, invented by Oiticica himself or the wearer of the *Parangolé*. Oiticica designated the *Parangolés* as 'object-structures', which looked like capes and banners – although they *weren't* actual capes or banners, because this ascription would have presupposed an all too metaphorical reference, whereby the object would distance itself from us in its referentiality. In accordance with the general claim of the post-neoconcretist artists, the work itself, or rather the latent 'object-structure', could only realize itself through and in the bodily action of the participant: by means of wearing the 'cape', dancing in it (the only instance where the captions became legible), or even when the 'action' could in fact be identified as action-less. In its fusion with the object-structure, the 'magical incorporation of the elements of the work as such, in the whole life experience of the spectator, whom I now call "participant"' (Oiticica, 1992b) as Oiticica described it, the body became the central nexus, not only of the totality 'participant-work' brought about, but also – especially when the *Parangolés* were collectively danced in – of the fusion of this totality with the surrounding environment. It is precisely by means of this creation of what Oiticica called an 'environmental whole', by means of inscribing the psycho-corporeal experience of the participant in a renewed relationality towards its surroundings, that the affecting of *vivência* was brought into play. Or, to quote Oiticica himself: 'There is, as it were, a violation of his being, as an "individual" in the world, towards one of participant as a motor centre, nucleus, inside the



“structure-work” (Oiticica, 1992a, p. 94). And: ‘This is the real metamorphosis which takes place in the inter-relation participant-work’. Subsequently, this experience of what Oiticica called a ‘violation of his being as an individual in the world’, was assumed to lead to ‘a corporeal-expressive transmutation which should appeal to the inner (supra-sensorial) creative potentialities of the participant’ (Oiticica, 1992a, p. 94).

If Oiticica’s artistic practice envisioned affecting the *vivência* of the participant by re-establishing an expressive relationship with the outer world, then Lygia Clark’s artistic practice could be regarded as diametrically opposed. Clark spurred a ‘descending’ towards a creative form of ‘inner knowledge’, by letting the body fold back upon itself, again also guided by the art object as a minimal proposition. While Clark’s appealing to the psycho-corporeal experience of the participant is more internally directed, she nonetheless endeavours an equal dynamics: ‘The spectator no longer projects himself and identifies himself in the work, and in living out its nature he lives within him’ (Clark, 1998a). And also, when describing *Caminhando*, a work in which the participant is invited to cut a Möbius strip: ‘*Caminhando* [Walking] is the name I have given to my last proposition. From there on I attribute an absolute importance to the immanent act carried out by the participant. *Caminhando* has all the possibilities connected to action itself: it allows choice, the unpredictable and the transformation of a virtuality into a concrete event’ (Clark, 1998c). Another case in point is the proposition *Máscaras Sensoriais* (*Sensorial Masks*, 1967). During a so-called ‘session’ initiated by Clark, a cloth hood was lowered onto the participant’s head. Every mask contained contraptions that altered sensorial perception in such a way that what Clark identified as a ‘destabilization of subjectivity’ was brought about. This sensorial alteration not only occurred in a visual way, for example, by placing small mirrors at eye level, which reflect the wearer’s eyes. Olfactory, auditory and tactile sensory experiences were also altered, for example, by aromatic seeds sewn in under the nose, or by devices at ear level in order to distort the environmental sound. The evocation of this sensorial estrangement, which brought about the destabilization of subjectivity and a rupture in signification, was again not an end in itself: it was a mere precondition for the sensorial reconstitution afterwards and a finding of renewed meaning. In short, it was a precondition for descending into what Clark termed the ‘immense abyss’ of inner life, as a quest for renewed, creative meaning with the body as locus of emanation.

### ‘I Embody Revolt’, ‘I Am Possessed’, ‘We Are Hungry’

If one of the captions on the *Parangolés* reads: ‘I embody revolt’, what then are the respective ‘embodiment’ and ‘revolt’ supposed to refer to – or rather,

following Oiticica’s artistic conceptions – to ‘present’? And what do they mean in the light of another caption that reads: ‘I am possessed’? Or, less tantalizing and exotic to the Western ear: ‘We are hungry’? Put differently: to elucidate the particularity of the dynamics of their artistic practices, we need to situate them in a culture-specific framework, analogous to understanding that the Brazilian notion of *vivência* ties in with other culture-specific notions. This theoretical outlook first of all furthers an examination of the way in which the particularity of Brazil’s socio-cultural constellation gave rise to the pursuit of this quest where the body is pivotal, to this attempt to unleash *vivência*.

Although it was not made explicit by the artists themselves, I would like to argue that they tried to affect this so-called *vivência* not as an end in itself nor as a consequence of Brazil’s so-called ‘bodily oriented’ culture. It arose, rather, as a consequence of the inscriptions of a dominant patriarchal signifying system, out of aversion to the coercive order of tradition enforced by the political regime for centuries, and more immediately to the manner in which the military regime would invade the body. In the preface of the 7th Brazilian edition of *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, a travel journal that records new Brazilian political vitality after years of military dictatorship, first published in 1986 by Félix Guattari and Sueli Rolnik, Rolnik writes:

A silent molecular revolution was taking place within discourse and, even more, in people’s gestures and attitudes: the first steps toward the disinvestment of a politics of subjectivation constructed over five hundred years of Brazilian history, since the country’s foundation. A period in which regimes of exclusion and segmentation – colonial, slave-holding, dictatorial and capitalist – were overlaid to form a perverse, powerfully established social hierarchy. Profoundly inscribed in subjectivities, this cartography is so cruel and so passively accepted that the country ranked (and continues to rank) near the top of the list of the world’s most unequal societies. (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008, p. 9)

This patriarchal signifying system – which, as Rolnik points out, haunted the Brazilians in the shifting guises of colonizer, dictator, capitalist – could be traced in how the Brazilian life-world was shaped in daily practice, but I would like to elucidate two particular instances where it imposed itself in a magnified way. First of all, we should consider the symbolic and ideological differentiation of Brazil’s syncretistic socio-cultural make-up, issued and sanctioned by Brazilian elitist paternalism as a means of oppression. At this point, the artistic practices of the Brazilian artists should be situated at the heart of a peculiar paradox. On the one hand, Brazil is made up of a heterogeneous, ambiguous and syncretistic socio-cultural reality, which can be traced back to colonial times. On the other hand, Brazilian society is extremely segregated according to a hierarchical social (read also ‘racial’) stratification. It is this rigid segregation that is fostered by a



political elite by means of a symbolic differentiation and domestication of this essentially 'uncategorizable' socio-cultural heterogeneity. Moreover, this symbolic differentiation as a means of oppression became an external locus of hegemonic signification to the extent that it was also *internalized* by the people itself. Second, the specific juncture in which the Brazilian artists operated saw the rise of an extremely repressive military regime that held sway from 1964 until 1985. The self was now not only increasingly symbolically invaded, but also literally invaded: torture and killings became part of daily reality. In sum, it is especially against the backdrop of an oppressive and internalized signification on the level of lived experience and accordingly a disciplined understanding of the self, and the military terror invading the body, that the artists would again turn to the body – understood as inseparable from the mind – and its potential for reiterated and altered signification.

The culture-specific framework in which these artists operated, should also be understood in the sense that the particular dynamics of their appeal to the *vivência* of the participant, can also be traced in other culture-specific practices, from which they drew consciously and unconsciously. In this respect we can, for example, trace psycho-corporal dynamics of the *carrioca* carnival, the possession trance of Afro-Brazilian syncretistic religions, and of syncretistic folk-Catholic healing practices, in Oiticica's and Clark's propositions. In addition, by again applying a diachronic perspective, we see that these cultural practices firmly crystallized as part of a common Brazilian cultural horizon concurrently with the artists' radicalized endeavours.

It seems to be quite evident that propositions like the *Parangolés* were influenced by cultural practices such as the *carrioca* carnival, which thrives on the pulse of the samba, and possession trances originating from Afro-Brazilian religions – even more so when we know that Oiticica looked for inspiration on the literal and metaphorical 'fringes' of Brazilian society: in the *fauleas*. Another indication of such influence is Clark's ample references in her writings to the (religious) ritual or the 'magic' of the object when describing the relationship between proposition and *vivência* of the participant.<sup>3</sup> What remains more oblique, though, is the question as to what exactly is analogous – or should we say 'homologous' – in artistic as well as other culture-specific practices. Which similar dynamics regarding the body can be traced? When we talked about *axé* and its connection to *vivência*, we already touched upon the dynamics of the possession trance. The possession trance and its particular play on sensory experience, aims at contact with an 'understanding' of the self freed from internalized hegemonic and rigidifying socio-cultural symbolizations, while at the same time inscribing the self in a renewed revitalized relationality towards the life-world. There is a dynamics of sensory 'de-differentiation'<sup>4</sup> between the world of the individual and the surrounding collective life-world, as a precondition for the 'potential of the self' to be unleashed. In view of this, the possession trance of the *Candomblé*, *Umbanda* and other initially syncretistic

Afro-Brazilian religions centres around a double 'initiation' of the body. The first 'negative initiation' consists of moulding the body, of what is called the *feitura de santo*, the 'fabrication of the saint'; one learns to incorporate religious knowledge in gestures, practices and bodily articulations. The 'positive initiation', the possession trance itself, when one becomes a *filho* or *filha-de-santo* (a son or daughter of the personal god) can be seen as the point where this accumulation of bodily religious knowledge reaches its climax and turns into its opposite: a breach with 'one's own daily bodily, mental and physical habits; habits that are usually dominated by social and cultural imperatives' (Opipari, 2004, p. 328). This trance possession is called, among others, *virar no santo* (transform in the saint) or simply *virar* (transform). Sometimes *rodar* is also used, and the possessed subsequently becomes *rodante*, he or she who 'turns around', who 'turns away' from him or herself through intense sensory experience in order to get into contact with the *orixá* and its distribution of *axé*. The possession trance can be said to foster embodiment in a renewed constellation (the incorporation of the *orixá* implying a release from rigidified embodied being). The *axé* not only manifests itself in the possessed, but is also redistributed in the collective surroundings. The healing dimension of the possession trance is often regarded as a specific form of 'cultural knowledge' (Boddy, 1994, p. 414).

These same dynamics of (sensory) de-differentiation as a means to connect an embodied understanding of self and life-world anew with its creative potentialities, can be traced in the dynamics of the *carrioca* carnival.<sup>5</sup> First of all, while it is clear that the individual becomes immersed in a collectivity, the *carrioca* carnival does not fit the theoretical paradigm under which European carnival is analyzed as an enacted drama. It is not simply a collective ritual of symbolic inversion, with, for instance, the poor acting like the rich and vice versa, but should, rather, be seen just as much as a ritual that plays on a particular dimension of psycho-corporal experience. In order to understand *carrioca* carnival, we first of all need to draw attention to its highly syncretistic character: at the end of the nineteenth century it crystallized as a truly collective ritual, when Afro-Brazilians organized themselves in what would later become the samba schools, and took over the masquerade, but also introduced their own music and dance. To a large extent the samba, as a pivotal element of the *carrioca* carnival, grants it its peculiar character regarding bodily experience. Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz states that once one has abandoned one's body to the pulse of the samba, it is swept away in such a way that 'one doesn't know any longer if the pulsing comes from outside or from one's own deepest inner being' (Pereira de Queiroz, 1992, p. 22). It is the rhythmic experience of the ritual that counts, and that guides this 'rhizomatic' collective ritual without centre, a ritual which unfolds as what Brazilian anthropologist Roberto DaMatta calls a 'manifold space' (DaMatta, 1991). This ties in with how the samba schools state their goals: during a performance they should *passar bem*,



'flow well' – they should pass on the right vibration, the right 'flow' that interconnects performer, spectator and surroundings. At the same time, *carrioca* carnival is the locus of what is termed in vernacular *brincar*, or 'play'. *Brincar* goes back to the Latin *vinculum*, which also means 'bond' or 'union'. Consequently, DaMatta interprets its dynamics as a 'play' with codes, wherein everybody feels united. From this perspective, it is most telling that *carrioca* carnival developed when the demarcation lines of socio-economic stratification were indelibly drawn. Maria Laura Viveiros de Castro Cavalcanti interprets the *carrioca* carnival as a ritual as follows: 'The countless components of a parade only *coalesce* at the time of the performance' (Viveiros de Castro Cavalcanti, 1999, p. 2, my emphasis). This statement is most telling. Notwithstanding that the *carrioca* carnival also entails discursive elements such as the *samba enredo* or the 'story' displayed, it is more precisely in the immediacy of psycho-corporal experience – 'the time of performance' – that all the different elements 'coalesce'. It is as such again not a ritual which collectively represents a certain narrative or a staged myth, but it is – because of the particular way in which it focuses on psycho-corporal experience – a transformative ritual, that unrolls at the fringes of established order. The concepts that Otílica used to describe the dynamics of his *Parangolés* could also be adopted to understand certain fundamental dynamics of the *carrioca* carnival and the possession trance. The creation of an 'environmental whole' is of crucial importance in both cultural expressions: it is by means of inscribing the psycho-corporal experience of the 'participant' in a renewed relationship towards his or her surroundings, that an experience of one's being as an individual in the world becomes violated, and that the affecting of *vivência*, a 'knowing' or generation of meaning in the immediacy of the sensory experience is brought into play. This 'violation of one's being as an individual in the world' in Otílica's *Parangolés*, the *carrioca* carnival and the possession trance, is also echoed in Clark's envisioned 'destabilization of subjectivity' through sensory alteration, although the specific form it takes in the artistic practice of Clark is also connected to other cultural expressions. More precisely, Clark's aspiration to let the body 'fold back upon itself, and find renewed meaning in internalized psycho-corporal experience, ties in with a Brazilian healing practice directed towards the healing of the *corpo aberto* (literally: 'the open body'). The notion of *corpo aberto* stems from folk-Catholic semantics, referring to a status of the body as too 'open'. It is a cultural expression voicing the experience that the body might be invaded in a too intrusive manner by the immediacy of existence, by the excessive absorption of emotions and (bad) energies – one of its possible intruders can be, for example, the 'evil eye'. When the body is too open and excessively internalizes, the 'weight' becomes too much, presses on the chest and breaks open the body. Healing practices should close the body again to a *corpo fechado* – a 'closed body. These practices – for example, winding a chord around the body until it 'closes' again – revolve around the manipulation of the borders of the body,

by articulating them in a renewed way, and by letting the body fold back upon itself to find renewed meaning in its innerness. This practice ties in with the sensorial reconstitution that Clark envisions after a destabilization of subjectivity through sensorial alteration.

### From Disciplined to Remade Lived Experience: The Generative Potential of Embodiment

So could we now frame more precisely how the Brazilian artists addressed the body in trying to affect the participant's *vivência*?<sup>6</sup> Using the term 'embodiment', I would like to contend that they envisioned tapping into its *generative potential*. A similar dynamics can be traced in the other cultural practices described above. To grasp this fully, we have firstly to return to what the introduction of the concept of embodiment enabled us to think.

When the concept of 'embodiment' came into vogue in anthropology (see Csordas, 1990, 1994, but also, for example, Jackson, 1989; Samuel, 1990; DeVich, 1993a; Lambek and Strathern, 1998), this unleashed a Copernican revolution in the understanding of the cultural production of meaning: cultural signifying was no longer regarded as a primordial question of some kind of signifying, free-floating post/structuralism or semiotics, or of the order of representation, and thus, for example, to be deciphered as a 'text' – positing the insulated mind both as its abstract and anaemic 'procreator' and, at the same time, as its 'decipherer'. Instead, culture was seen to be grounded in the inextricably intertwined body and mind, that is as a signifying practice based in *lived experience*, where the mind can only manifest itself as embodied, and the body consequently only as 'em-minded'. Put slightly differently, by positing the concept of 'embodiment', a dimension of materiality was added that collapsed the duality of mind and body, which in its turn quite thoroughly subverted former rigid notions about how and where culture – the cultural production of meaning – comes about and is disseminated.<sup>7</sup> As Strathern and Lambek point out, embodiment 'is a processual term, whose locus lies in the reception of the cultural into the body but equally the work of the body in building cultural forms' (Lambek and Strathern, 1998, p. 13). When we look at Csordas's methodological introduction of the concept of 'embodiment' in the anthropological field, informed by phenomenology, we could read it as a diagnosis of the locus where cultural signifying practices primordially arise. This locus is not to be situated on a representational, objectified level, but on the level of lived experience: it is in the immediacy of being-in-the-world that a 'pre-objective' (thus not yet objectified, read: representationally differentiated) 'cultural reservoir' becomes activated, that signifying takes place and *possibly* ends in 'cultural objects' situated on a representational level. As Csordas states: 'If our perception "ends in objects", the goal of a phenomenological anthropology of



perception is to capture that moment of transcendence in which perception begins, and, in the midst of arbitrariness and indeterminacy, constitutes and is constituted by culture' (Csordas, 1990, p. 9).

This emphasis on the phenomenological being-in-the-world with regard to the production of cultural meaning subsequently attributes another status to the body. The body is no longer regarded as a passive receptor of cultural inscriptions and thus as a passively construed object,<sup>8</sup> but as an 'experiencing agent' or a seat of subjectivity that *actively* contributes to the production of cultural meaning, although on another level. Thus, culture becomes something that is *primordially generated* in this material and experiential process of embodiment, and consequently informed by conditionality. This generative aspect accounts for the sole – 'paradoxical' Csordas claims – essential characteristic of embodiment: its *existential indeterminacy* (Csordas, 1994, p. 5). Because this existential indeterminacy entails a *creative* potential – cultural meaning can be reiterated, altered and newly construed – this experiential level of existence was often granted the status of space of resistance. On this level of lived experience, meaning could be generated that *countered* culture on its dialectical abstract, representational level or what is equally called the 'symbolic order of culture'.

These radicalized Brazilian artistic practices which emerged around the mid-1960s, can to a large extent be grasped by these theoretical outlines. When we recall the Möbius strip, we could denote its ideogrammatic meaning as follows: lived experience as being-in-the-world and meaning connect immediately without symbolic operations of distance, separation, division. The artists see the 'proposition' as a way to tap into the lived experience of the participant, to tap into her or his existence as embodied being. Or put slightly differently: their practices play on the level of lived experience, that is inscribe themselves in the immediacy of sensory experience, of embodiment as being-in-the-world, whereby a preobjective cultural reservoir contemporaneously becomes activated and intersects with material conditionality, the latter understood as the artworks as specific propositions. Moreover, we could say that they envisioned this level of lived experience, because it is embodiment in its phenomenality, which is the locus where signifying practices *primordially* arise. As such, the proposition should activate a dormant creative potential, the 'creative potentialities of the participant' (Oiticica, 1992a, p. 94). It is this creative potential, or to use Csordas's terminology the 'existential indeterminacy' inherent to embodiment, that should generate new 'embodied' meaning – not meaning that is grasped with the mind through representational thinking, but meaning that 'emerges' in the immediacy of the bodily being-in-the-world, 'lived thought' or *Vivência*. It is the embodied being of the participants themselves opening up to the arbitrary order of presence that activates a creative, transformative potential – or to quote Clark once more: 'the poetry is expressed directly in the act of doing' (Clark, 1998b).

As far as the other cultural expressions are concerned, we see that the possession trance is supposed to unleash a similar particular embodied experience: the trance is not an out-of-body experience, but rather the generative potential of embodiment is appealed to through the sensory experience of de-differentiation, since its endeavour is to tap into an embodied faculty that potentially unlocks an experiencing of the self-obscured by conformity to social conventions. The *carrioca* carnival and the folk-Catholic healing practice of the *corpo aberto* likewise play on the generative potential of embodiment, the former by means of a sensory de-differentiation, the latter by sensorially remoulding the boundaries of the body. All these practices are inscribed on the level of lived experience.

We should not, however, understand the particularity of the described artistic and other culture-specific practices in the following way: by seeing the process of embodiment itself as pivotal, but not merely in the sense of activating a non-representational level that would generate meaning that counters a representational level of meaning. If we want to elucidate the artistic practices of the artists in question<sup>8</sup> in terms of the notion of 'embodiment', then stating that their practices merely played on embodiment as an 'understanding' or 'making sense' in a pre-reflexive or even pre-symbolic (but not pre-cultural) way, situated on the level of lived experience, to counter objectification and representation, seems insufficiently to grasp its particular dynamics. After all, their practices were not – again, whether intentional or not – counter-practices against a patriarchal representational signifying system and how it took shape on a reflective level *an sich*. Rather, they were counter-practices against the way in which this symbolic discourse became *internalized*, inscribed itself on the level of lived experience, shaped embodiment as being-in-the-world itself. If the notion of embodiment, understood as the existential ground of culture and self (Csordas, 1990), implies that it is the locus where lived experience is culturally shaped, then it can presumably also become the locus where lived experience and a primordial understanding of the self can become socio-culturally *disciplined*. Consequently, in my view, these artists rather envisioned the transformative transition from a socio-culturally disciplined and static 'embodiedness', to a reiterated and altered dynamic 're-embodiment', both situated at the level of lived experience. This re-embodiment was fostered by an opening up of the body, a remoulding of the embodiment experience of the body as a precondition for meaning to be generated anew. 'Re-embodiment' should be understood here as an appeal to the seminal capacities of the body (Devich, 1993a, p. 265), the body being both source and agent, embodiedness and processual embodiment (Devich, 1993a, p. 46). Accordingly, their artistic practice as an endeavour to appeal to *vivência*, should first of all be understood as an endeavour to unlock fixed 'embodiedness', and understood in its Brazilian socio-cultural context as a disciplined experience and a disciplined primordial understanding of the self. This is why Oiticica



envisioned a 'violation of the being of the participant as individual in the world', by means of a psycho-corporeal sensory de-differentiation, and why Clark envisioned a 'destabilization of subjectivity', by means of a sensorial alteration. They each furthered the unlocking of fixed embodiedness concurrently with the unlocking of a fixed sensory experience, both intricately intertwined on the level of lived experience. When ultimately no longer tied up in this disciplined embodiedness, the participant could subsequently be brought into touch with so-called 'lived thought', as a stratum or faculty in psycho-corporeal experience where primary processes of signification take place, and where signification can consequently manifest itself as renewed and altered. Only in this instance, could embodied being become the central nexus of their artistic practice as the source of meaning, as the locus where meaning and signification, and a correlative understanding of the self, primordially arises.

In conclusion, what we could state drawing on this conceptual link is that artistic practices and other culture-specific practices shared a common dynamic: the unlocking of a rigidified understanding of the self on the level of lived experience, in order to affect a creative embodied potential. This indicates that shared culture-specific entanglements can give rise to entwining intuitions. As such, part of the germinal ground of the Brazilian artistic practices of the 1960s revolving around the notion of *vivência* should be located in the specific manner in which a culture endeavoured to 'remake' disciplined lived experience.

## About the Author

Emma Sidgwick is trained as an artist and anthropologist, and works on the intersection of art history and cultural anthropology. She is mainly interested in the cultural creation and construction of sites for the emergence of meaning. Currently, she works on notions of potentiality as articulated in the early Christian motif of the Woman with the Blood Flow, and this as part of the research project *The Haemorrhaging Woman* (Mark 5: 24–34). *An Iconological Research into the Meaning of the Bleeding Woman in Medieval Art. Also a Contribution to the Blood and Touching Taboo before the Era of Modernity* – funded by the Research Fundings of the Catholic University Leuven (2008–2012), promotor: Professor Dr Barbara Baert.

## Notes

- 1 This conclusion is based on former research of my own. While the concept of *vivência* continues to be used in a rather throw-away manner in art-historical discourse, I examined the concept more deeply in my master thesis *Vivência: lichamelijke immanentie in de Braziliaanse avant-garde vanaf het neoconcretisme tot 1985* ('*Vivência*. Bodily immanence in the Brazilian avant-garde from neoconcretism to 1985 onwards'), and tried to grasp its anthropological grounds.

- 2 See, for example, how Suchy Rohik describes the later recuperation of the concept in capitalist's marketing strategies and at the same time voices its original widespread rootedness in Brazilian culture, as well as its final resistance to recuperation (Rohik, 2000).
- 3 See writings like 'On the magic of the object' and 'On the ritual', both reprinted in Clark (1998a).
- 4 Term used according to anthropologist René Dervich (see, for example, Dervich, 1993b).
- 5 I describe the *carrioca* carnival here as it took shape during the period of post-neoconcrete art, leaving aside any considerations of its current capitalist recuperation.
- 6 This is not to say that Górdas envisioned replacing culture in terms of objectified abstraction ('text') with culture in terms of existential immediacy. His endeavour was to 'offer to textuality a dialectical partner' and 'to place the body in a paradigmatic position complementary to the text, rather than allowing it to be itself subsumed under the text metaphor' (Górdas, 1994, p. 12).
- 7 This refers to Górdas's critique on Foucauldian post-structuralism, clearly informed by a crisis of subjectivity, whereby the body is merely understood as the passive receptor of cultural inscriptions and power, and is attributed no capacity of agency to reiterate or resist (Górdas 1994, p. 1).
- 8 This is by no means an exhaustive account of their dynamics or signification.

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## Book Reviews

### A review of *Être bête*

Vinçiane Despret and Jocelyne Porcher  
*Actes Sud, Arles, France, 2007, paperback,*  
*144pp., French price: EUR 14.00,*  
*ISBN 13: 978-274271264*

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 doi:10.1057/sub.2010.3

In this book, Despret and Porcher attempt to disassemble the 'scientific' discourse of the difference between humans and animals by showing the types of methodological choices that cause it. Up until the twentieth century the discourse on the difference between humans and animals was not supported by disciplines such as Comparative Psychology and Ethology, which were consolidated academically by way of cutting off relations with practices in which the question of human specificity was and still is simply irrelevant. This refers to the practices of stockbreeders and those who raise animals. Here the relationship with other species appears as a relationship between beings that have a capacity for agency. At the beginning of the twentieth century Zootechnics served as a bridge between the practices of animal breeders and Comparative Psychology. Zootechnics industrialized the relationship between animals and their breeders. Comparative Psychology and Ethology tried to make sure that everything the animal does is predictable. This determinism was looked for by Psychology in the laboratory, where there is no room for subjective relationships with the animals. Lorenz founded Ethology by distancing himself from the laboratory

and treating his animals as subjects, but along with Tinbergen he needed to elaborate a *scientific* discourse and they turned to mechanical analogies in order to develop explanatory models of behaviour. The amiable spirit of nineteenth-century naturalism was given up in favour of an unpleasant conception of animals as mere instruments of scientific reason.

The authors of the book approach modern breeders as heirs of a tradition that has not lost sight of subjective relationships with other species. The main part of the book is dedicated to showing what various European breeders have said about the difference between human beings and animals. They search for human specificity in more complex and nuanced answers than the 'scientific' discourse that bases this difference in some quality and whether animals have it or not. Despret and Porcher denounce the fact that the difference between man and the rest of the animals is habitually formed by assuming human uniqueness and defining the characteristics of the animals by what they are unable to do and what man is. However this standardized formulation has much academic vice. Despret and Porcher prefer to present the question to the interviewees in an open format. The participants in the interview complied with this beyond expectations and were able to deconstruct the theoretical bias inherent in the problem. The question was more like a small discourse that ended up something like this: 'According to you as a farmer, how should we think about the question of the [difference between man and animal] so that it could be of interest to those of us who study it and so that we